

Red Hair AND Blue Sea

By STANLEY P. OSBORN

When Palmyra Tree thus flung herself out of the arms of Olive, the brown man had been carrying her again down into the sea. The strong arms rescued her, yet she fought desperately. Ashore, she had been slow to trust those half seen figures about the fires. Having trusted, she could not bear to be snatched away before her appeal had been heard.

The moon was gone in a downpour of rain. Sky and sea and land had lost form—dissolved. And yet in this meaning world something had remained solid, for presently the girl received a smart bump between the shoulders. Twisting, she found an unstable snape that intimated, rather than sign, intention as a canoe.

Olive sat her on the canoe, steadied her there, pointed, his hand seemed to have into nothingness. He raised her own arm so she felt the direction. No need for Olive to trust as face close to hers and make the sign of the scar, it was the pursuing Burke.

She had just been suggesting to free herself from the brown man, yet now, when she saw that success would have thrown her at once into the hands of the white, she was against. For with Burke present his timid creatures ceased to offer any chance; it was again with Olive's clamor she felt her hope to lie.

But there was that leaf letter! She strove to make Olive understand they must go oack. She pointed landward, gesticulated.

It was inevitable he should think she continued in resistance. He took her firmly, laid her prone, made her grip the framework.

With the paddle, strong, noiseless, Olive drove the canoe out into the world of waters.

Relieved of her apprehension, she began to patch together the incidents of their flight, into a revealing film. When the wind had revived to let Ponape Burke beat back to the first island in pursuit of Olive—(could it really be little more than twenty-four hours since the white man imprisoned her there?)—he found the place abandoned. He had also found her supplies gone, a thing implying a boat, and Olive's forgery of a boat's imprint on the sand, a counterfeit softened into greater verisimilitude by the placid tide.

Burke must either detect the fraud, or believe some vessel, almost certainly the Japanese gunboat, had sighted her distress signals. In that event, he was free to assume Olive had drowned in his effort to reach land, had arrived too late and then swum away, or had been taken off with the girl, presumably against his will.

She had no knowledge where Jaluit lay, or how far. But it was within reach; her only hope. As the former German base, there must be four or five white men and a dozen or so Japs; and if this one of the two American mission centers was closed, still native Christians.

She so wanted to go to Jaluit that she could not fail to endow this savage with the grace of taking her there. Absurd though the idea, it gripped her. She could not, for the moment, but believe it true.

After all, though, what could it serve? She tried to rise for a view astern, but dared not stand. She saw no sail, yet knew her leech, the canoe's theft, had made a chase certain. Their flying start would save them from other canoes but not from the swift Pigeon of Noah.

Now and then her companion himself would rouse to stand with ease on the jumping canoe and scan the sea for an enemy.

In one of these wakeful intervals she made, interrogatively, the sign of the scar which had come, in their conversations, to signify the white man. Passing at once from his Buddha-like repose into the animation of discourse, Olive pointed to the sun and then to a spot considerably further on in its line of march. Pursuit, it seemed, must be expected, but not as yet.

Now followed a long pantomime, at times unintelligible. The brown man, in his explanation, was hampered by the limit of action possible in a canoe. His story included himself and Burke, the island, the knife, what seemed to be a gun, the canoe, the Pigeon of Noah. Much of it, as it came, was meaningless because she did not grasp other parts upon which the meaning depended.

There was a point which baffled her, where Olive went through the motions of binding hands and feet, and forced something, crosswise, into his mouth. At first she thought he himself had been tied and gagged, then that it must have been Burke. But long afterwards, when the savage had again sunk into stupor, the explanation flashed into her mind. She could now reconstruct the scene ashore, in part from what Olive had made clear, in part from what her in-

telligence told her must have occurred.

Ponape Burke, then, had felt that, if they had not been rescued by some vessel, they must have a canoe. And to make sure they should not get one in the dark hours, he had had all the canoes on the island brought together and had set over these a guard of two men with rifles, himself waiting near. Olive, she surmised, had expected secretly to obtain a canoe from a friend and so sail without destroying Burke's possible belief in the fictitious ship. But the brown man, to his dismay, had found this impossible. As daylight must not discover them ashore, he had had no alternative save to take a canoe by force.

Under cover of the rain he had somehow managed to surprise, had bound the guards and got away without an alarm. He had hoped to prevent the chase thus made certain, by cutting rigging on the schooner; but for some reason, had had to desist with little more than an hour or so of delay ensued.

One detail of Olive's pantomime explained perhaps why Burke had trusted the canoes to any guard but his own. He had been drinking heavily. And so it was she responded with a cry when Olive, at last, clicking his tongue in chagrin, pointed astern.

No need for her eyes to seek out a tiny something against the sky to know that the Lupe-a-Noa was come.

CHAPTER VIII.

She would have snatched her parasol to raise as an additional sail, but now, to her astonishment, she found that Olive was not making sail but taking it in.

Slowly the speck that was the Pigeon of Noah grew larger. One hardly believed so small a thing could threaten so much of evil.

She understood now why Olive had not tried to run. Their hope depended, not on flight, but in lying unobserved.

As the topmasts had risen ever higher against the sky, so now they receded—and were gone.

It was now, in this last twelve hours that Palmyra had seen Olive for the first time handle a curious kite-frame affair of sticks, decked out with small yellow cowry shells. This frame she had noticed at her original inspection of the canoe, and since, when she was not too tired, too frightened, to miserable to think at all, she had wondered what it could be.

This contrivance which she had endowed with so much mystery proved to be nothing more than the brown man's chart. Yet, even at that, it was still a mystery. Among the islanders it was forbidden except to the hereditary navigators, and among white men few had ever grasped its application; none, perhaps, had ever been able to read upon the ocean's surface its guides and warnings.

With such a frame of sticks, however, Olive, could he have made it plain to her, sailed from lagoon to lagoon across the trackless ocean in almost the assurance of a civilized mariner with chart, compass and sextant.

That night, she awoke to find herself, again, encircled by those great arms, held close against that copper breast. But no struggle now. It was land, land—thank God, land!

Was the island inhabited? She had seen no sign, and Olive appeared at ease. But, then, this was the ocean side of the atoll at night, abandoned to the ghosts. Anyone who saw her would think her a disembodied spirit. She shuddered. Was she now in truth more than the shadow of that girl who once had lived?

As the savage lay asleep, the knife sheath on his belt, was uppermost. When the girl's eyes reopened they became fixed upon that blade. It was very close. Almost she could reach out and touch the handle. She thought of the other times she would have disarmed him.

As she sat, her fingers went out once and again experimentally toward the knife, and were withdrawn. The savage, contrary to her expectations, did not awaken to accuse her. She knew by now it really made no difference who had the knife.

A third time, then, her hand went out—and closed upon the wooden handle. The knife was loose in the sheath. Slowly she drew the weapon forth.

The girl was thrilled, intimidated by her success. Olive had become so much the urge that she had had the feeling it would be impossible, in the slightest degree to thwart him. Yet here, by reaching out her hand, she had his precious knife!

She did not shudder at the thought as she had once before. Association had made a serious purpose no longer possible. She only glowed in a new sense of power, restoring her self-esteem, her good humor.

Quickly, however, this elation faded. In its place she found, to her surprise, a touch of guilt, as if she had been untrue to a trust. He had trusted her, and now, lying there in all his strength, he was like Samson. How had Delilah felt as the shears cut through the last of those locks? But Palmyra was not irrevocably the Delilah, for she could restore the knife.

She was, indeed, leaning forward with that purpose, when the savage awoke. Panic stricken, the girl jerked back, not in fear of his anger, but in a guilty apprehension that, seeing the knife above him, he might think she attempted murder.

Unaware, the brown man sat up at once, looked at the heavens, his clock. Then he sprang to his feet, caught her up once more like a child, started for the canoe.

Palmyra wanted to give the knife back, but her arm was pinioned. She tried to bring it forward, felt the brown man's precautionary tightening of his hold, became again conscious of her grievance, jerked vigorously.

Olive was like a long-suffering parent. He did not know why she resisted, but he did know he could bundle her up in his arms, with one broad hand across her mouth.

Sudden rage possessed the girl. She would not be treated so. She struggled with all her might. The knife impeded her and she flung it down.

The blade fell noiselessly. As it struck in the flooding moonlight it sent out one futile flash. But the savage, all unaware, marched on, holding the girl in vise-like grip.

When Olive had carried Palmyra thus unceremoniously down to their canoe, the sea was not long in reasserting its power. Her respite had been too brief for any real rally against the tyrant savage.

As the craft cut its way through the water, the girl was increasingly sorry for what she had done. Her act had not been deliberate, but afterwards, at the canoe, she had failed to call his attention to the empty sheath.

She was astonished not that so infallible a machine should not almost immediately have discovered the loss.

Not, however, until the hour for bananas and coconuts did the square copper hand go back after the blade. Then there appeared upon that face what was acutely an expression—puzzled, startled, bereaved.

The queer brown-shot eyes fixed themselves upon her. For a moment there seemed a pained reproach in them, but he spoke no word. Instead, he stooped, and she saw with a gasp that he was drawing from its place a heavy stick.

The brown man picked up one of the coconuts, and cautioned her with those square hands, so expressive where his face was blank. Then he raised the nut and brought it down upon the sharpened point. The wood entered the green husk. With a side-wise prying motion that wrenched her hands, despite the supporting framework, he tore off a section of the husk. Again the nut came down upon the point, impaling itself, and in a moment the whole husk was removed.

After Olive had husked several of the nuts, he opened two by pecking them with the sharp end of a third, repanning them as neatly as a sur-

geon.

The girl accepted food and drink humbly.

She would have stuck her knife to the heart of this brown man—and he had meant only to give her food!

Her eye filled. With a girlish impulse she thrust her hand into her dress and drew out the weapon. She would make amend.

There was something very sweet in the gesture, in the expression with which she offered the knife. But the savage accepted her surrender in the serene seeming unconsciousness of the Buddhas when their devotees lay before them gifts that may have meant months, perhaps years, of sacrifice.

In a new sense of trust, she turned quickly to him, her cheeks flushing and spoke his name as nearly as she could in the way he liked: "O-lee-vay."

He looked up surprised. "O-lee-vay," she repeated — "Jaluit?"

He did not comprehend. She tried the pronunciation with varying inflections. Then, preception.

The savage grinned, raised an arm and, cheerfully informative—pointed astern.

The girl caught her breath. "Oh, no, no!" she cried in panic. "You don't don't understand. Jaluit—jaluit—"

But all to plainly he did understand. And he was sailing directly away from her one chance of rescue.

As she stared unblinkingly across the seas the low black streamer of cloud unavoidably, in the intensity of her desire, suggested to her mind the smoke of a vessel racing to her aid.

The cloud, as is now and then the case, was not unlike the smudge from a funnel. And, in her fatigue, her helplessness, the very impossibility of the thing gave her this product of her imagination an extraordinary power.

She saw the steamer rising from the ocean. She climbed its ladder to the rail. And there, triumphant on its deck, she was safe!

And in that moment she knew she could not be hard on the brown man. She would not demand his punishment. Only a savage after all—no knight errant of the deep sea—his

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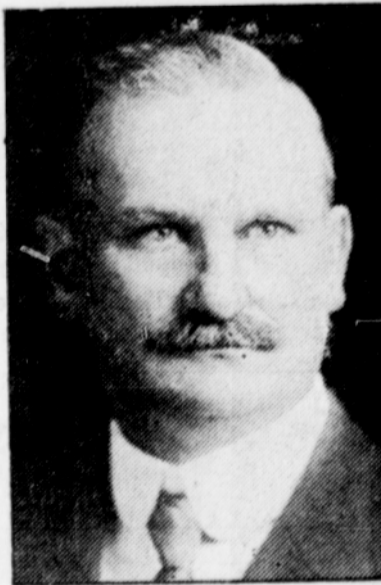
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